

How and where does German's (and European's) View of Art differ from the Chinese?

Outline of some major Points of View.

By **Oliver Fischer** (M.A. University of Heidelberg)

Well my dear Reader, to begin with, Art has about as many “critics” and “connoisseurs” as there are eyes in this world. Needless to say, everybody has his or her personal and very individual *View of Art*¹, thus it’s so difficult to really “talk” about Art and consequently about beauty, let alone the comparing and ranking of painters or even to give paintings a “category, status or grade”. Since this topic could arouse numerous different opinions and also we had to omit too many details, please bear with me with some humor and easiness. Firstly, which Points of View would and could one use? Besides, “*Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder*”, as a popular maxim rightly points out. Art and Beauty are intriguingly related, which gives hereby subjectivity a vast platform. Enjoyment of Art is a completely subjective affair. Therefore we want to consider and explore the “Views of Art” using objectivity. Let’s examine some major objective differences and why they were popular in their time and regions. What is objectively a piece of Art? Means, Materials, Techniques, Colors and other mediums? Let’s start at looking at “Ancient Art”:

The origins of Art lies far far in the past, dating back to even Pre-Neolithic times². For what reason (the big “Why” and “Who”) will maybe always be a big mystery. Or did human-kind just get tired of the beauty of Mother Nature? Maybe they just wanted to “save” some nice “Pictures and Memories”, to add up colors, and to make a difference? So many questions to answer, and all of them might be partly true. Nonetheless, to color one’s life could have been indubitably one of the main reasons. But whatever the reasons were, we now have Art. And Art is universal; it is included in nearly every aspect of our Lives and it is used worldwide. Art is part of our lives! It’s the feeling that we get out of it which makes it so precious.

Art, essentially and rationally, is quite useless since it doesn’t cloth, feed or give us a roof, but it touches our “Feelings – Body or even the Soul” which in turn triggers our “Happiness Glands” or gives us other, individually different positive “vibrations” (or feelings), in most of the cases. Maybe this is *one of the biggest differences* between us humans and animals, besides our exalted good virtues. Art makes us human! E.H. Gombrich states: “There is no Art, just Artists”. Art is indeed a concept which differs from Culture to Culture and is interpreted differently.

As there are different types of humans (better not use races), so likewise there are different types of cultures. It’s the culture which most strongly influences the way someone looks at something, besides individual opinions and views. So how do a German / European View of Art differ from Chinese View of Art? The answer must be in their distinctive “Histories” and in their unique cultural development!

¹ For this Article we focused mostly on the figurative kind of Art like Paintings, Scrolls, Pictures, Carvings, etc.

² For a complete history of Art see: E.H. Gombrich: *The Story of Art*. 1995; Phaidon Press Ltd., London. Also see: E.H. Gombrich: *Die Geschichte der Kunst*. 1996; S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.

To start with, we should keep one central thing in mind: who are and were the people usually looking at Art? And who wrote about it? It was the literati, the upper class, and the rich, thus the same people who generally could read and write and have the opportunity to enjoy Art. Hence the ones, who could appreciate and criticize Art, wrote about it. And as a result they defined Art, decided about it, helped to improve it or to change it, and most essentially they financed it. How they viewed Art is easily perceptible from their writings. It was their judgment and appreciation that decided which Artist is foremost, valuable and influential. The lower class maybe did, if they had spare time and interest, look at Art, sometimes in temples or public places. Also they adorned their homes with folk art and other objects for decoration. But they were not part of the literary tradition. Their opinion is nowhere recorded. Their appreciation was somehow irrelevant. For the best, they could become themselves an appreciated artisan. This changed only recently in the last hundred years or so, when literacy spread, when the living situation improved and more spare time was available and foremost when education increased. Conspicuously it coincided with the rise of the so called “Modern Art”, the transformation of the world towards a modern society. And the View of Art changed radically. So, when we talk about Art and its perception, we should take into account that two different classes of people had their say. The voices and opinions from the old sources had other views and awareness than many of today’s modern world. Furthermore, today’s Artists still try to satisfy their needs, but on the same time they are as well freer to create than they ever were, sometimes they are even not in need of financing, giving them absolute freedom. Therefore, since we are talking about “Views of Art” in this article, I will to a great extent stay with the conservative and traditional view of art, trying to outline accordingly some major points of the literati and well-educated art-lovers of old and new and what they most appreciate.

Four or three thousand years ago, in the beginning of the pictorial Art, two mediums were generally used as “Art Carrier”: Pottery and Metals. In the beginning, these mediums were quite plain, as time progressed they became more and more decorated, and the respective artisans became slowly specialized artist. The decoration of tools, utensils of daily use and jewelry were the prime and earliest objects from where we can study the history of Art. The development they underwent in just one thousand years was astounding and points out how humans in all parts of the earth seemingly were compelled to strive for improvement and innovation, thus evolutionizing its culture. We can see these formidable artifacts in museums, such as bronzes from the Xia to the Zhou Dynasties, how the decorations and the art became more and more sophisticated and intriguing.

On the other side of the earth, the ancient artifacts of 4000 – 2000 years ago, like old Celtic and Ionic pottery, jewelry and metallic weapons, showing astounding examples of a metal and pottery Artistry of the highest standards. Like the painted Athenians’ amphorae in Greek museums. Or gilded and adorned weapons of the Celts and last but not least the jewelry of the Etruscians. These are all outstanding examples what could be achieved by “humans” in spite of such “hard times” without the help of all the helpful and practical tools and machines of our modern times, it appears that Culture always strove for enhancement, no matter where or when. To put it bluntly, as a matter of fact, the “Culture of Arts” is a Culture of wasting resources. Materially or economically seen, it seems Art is rather useless. “Art” does not make a car faster, neither a house more stable nor a weapon more deadly. However, by not being just “Animals” (or economically thinking soulless beings), but controversially by being “Humans” (thus being the divine pinnacle of creation), Art found its place and so we became, we evolved to “Homo Sapiens Artium”. Now there was more to life than just to eat, drink, sleep and (shamefully) kill.

These first examples of Art show a wonderful and detailed Artisanery. “Art” and “Skill” developed alongside. Art was generally defined by Skill. The higher one’s Skill was, the more the Artisan became renowned as being an Artist. The *Artisan* (a worker using his “hands” and has specialized craftsman’s skills) IS the BASE of ART. The individual skill made one a good or a poor Artist, many just stayed Artisans. Only a few could advance to the status of Artist. The sales and popularity of one’s product was the criterion by which an Artist was valued. The specific skill, in which an Artist exceeded the others, was the measure of comparing and evaluating Art. The best skilled one was also the best Artist. How it was the case of Greek Athenians pottery 2300 years ago. One shop in Athens exceeded all others in its finesse of its products. But it was Athens’ sculptures which were the pinnacle of Art during that period, unparalleled till Michelangelo.

And here we come to speak about the first big differences between German (or European) View of Art and the Chinese View:

The decoration in Europe was chiefly geometrical or with animal patterns. The mathematic obsessed Greeks, the Forefathers and the Molders of our modern European Culture, influenced our thinking and views by emphasizing Geometry as they did in buildings and decorations, thus affecting our traditional view of things. The second strong influence came by their attempt of lifelikeness in their Art. This is especially visible from their sculptures and graphics on their pottery, which can be seen today in many Museums in Europe. Nature was a standard of recognizing good Art. The more it was lifelike, the higher the artisan’s skill, the more it was seen as a piece of art, maybe even titled as a Masterpiece. As an old Chinese dictum goes, it is more difficult to draw a dog than a ghost. Everyone knows what a dog looks like and can therefore compare the picture with reality, but no one has ever really seen a ghost! So no one can truly judge what a ghost looks like. Realistic and accurate representation of real objects and humans was for the art connoisseurs of old a crucial requirement.

Consequently, by analyzing the development of ancient Greek-Ionic Art-objects, one can clearly see a linear development towards more precise and elaborate geometry and more lifelike sculptures and pictures. The higher the skill, the higher it is the appreciation of the artisan. Sometimes some truly talented artisans became so admired, they began to sign their own oeuvres, which can be seen on many fine potteries objects like vases and jars in the great museums in Europe showing ancient Greek Art around 500 – 400 B.C. Just like painters centuries later signed their paintings. The Greek culture influenced greatly the Roman Culture and artisans; they even imported numerous Greek slaves to work for them. As the Roman Empire expanded, it influenced also the conquered regions and colonies; the Romans (and their army) unified peoples of all Europe and gave them a model, a kind of standard how “Civilization” should be and as a consequence influencing their View of Art too.

As a result, the View of Art of Europeans for centuries has had a deep-rooted inborn foundation in the following points:

- The Skill of artistry (e.g. of the artist) > attempt for flawlessness
- The Lifelikeness (incl. perspective) > attempt for realism
- A Geometrical “balance” of the objects or picture, frequently symmetric
- Strive for perfection of the Art object

Art was so subconsciously prized and appreciated. This was the widespread established basis of criticism and approval of Art throughout Europe for centuries. After the “discovery” of the

perspective for painting during the Renaissance Epoch³, the endeavor for realism increased. Since then, perspective is one of the most striking differences between traditional European paintings and Chinese traditional paintings. It took quite some time, till a European would get used to appreciate Chinese pictures which were so lacking in perspective. This was a crucial and so very noticeable point where these two different painting traditions differed significantly. Till now, many foreigners arriving for the first time to China and viewing for the first time traditional Chinese paintings of houses or landscapes find the lack of perspective unfamiliar and odd. Their minds are accustomed to realism. Realism was a strong criterion in Art! This lasted until about 100 years ago, with the beginning of modern Art, which till now, still evokes a much disputed cultural upheaval.

What we already know and should not forget here, is that all or most of the Artisans and thus Artists of ancient times worked for making a living, e.g. for money (or food). Free Artists who just enjoyed their Art without worrying about living expenses were nearly nonexistent. Hence these artists were quite compelled and restricted in their freedom of creation; they had to please the View of Art of their clients/patrons more, then rather being creative for their own pleasures and artistic views. Usually the pieces of Art were made on order for clients demanding special topics. Extremely seldom had they carte-blanche to express their ideas, this being a new way for Artists emerged with modern Art. Money and the people who owned it influenced Art directly! Art was not anymore a feeble flower who could grow on itself, like it was maybe during the Neolithic times (cave drawings).

Having written this for Europe, let's now look towards the Far-East:

In China, who we can consider as the “Over-Mother” of all East-Asian Art (like the Greek and Roman in Europe), the decorations on their implements like bronzes and pottery were also fairly geometrical in the beginning. The ancient Chinese pottery shows also animalistic traits portraying the natural world like fish on its outer surface. Others show geometrical patterns, parallel lines or intricate decors. This was quite similar to the ancient European craftsmanship of the pre-civilized era. After that societies grew and became more complex, also Art was beginning to change and to specialize, like in ancient Greece as well as in China.

Needless to point out, that in China the artisan also had to work for a living, relying only on their particular skill. The higher their skill, the better it is for their business. Nevertheless the Chinese cultural philosophy differed greatly from ones in Europe. The upper society, who was always the gentry in control of ordering and producing the products, having and impersonating (representing) the cultural background of their society and also by being able to pay more than a normal farmer would, dictated the manufacture of paraphernalia and tools and the decoration on them, based on their beliefs, views and religion. The further the society developed, the more the discrepancies diverged, in comparison to the age of hunter and gatherers. And so did the View of Art. By knowing that the lower class of a society / culture usually emulate and mime their upper class, we can safely focus on the noble gentry of the time. What sort of Art was there in ancient China and East-Asia? Bronzes (like utensils, weapons and vessels) Pottery and later sculptures, much like in ancient Occident.

In the past, before the Qin and Han Dynasties, China was culturally not homogeneously unified; regional differences were still very great. The writing spread slowly and the Chinese archaic signs were regionally different, so was their customs, languages and consequently

³ Perspective was already known before, in China as in Europe, but it was till then not used consequently, neither methodically analyzed nor technically taught, rather it was somewhat occasionally applied to some degree, out of empirical detection and until the Renaissance not regularly employed in Europe (let alone China).

culture. China and its Culture were not amalgamated yet. Qin took the task and started a nationwide unification of measuring and writing standards, etc. However, most Artifacts were quite similar, the decor of pottery was either geometrical or with little pictures depicting fish and other motives. Bronzes were decorated with geometrical décor, which evolved then to great complexity. Taotie masks [饕餮] and other stylized figures came into use. Humans were also already represented from the Shang Dynasty on, but even though they tried to achieve a kind of realism, their representations of animals, humans and life scenes were somehow always rather stylized and it seems the artisans (or artists) did not feel the need to pursue realism as primary importance, for whatever reason. Seemingly the “idea” was enough to be represented, which is often perceptible till today in Chinese painting when they depict humans. Later, after China became unified and the Cultures merged into a more united entity, also Art, Writing, Religion and Customs became more congruent, spread among the literati all over the empire and evolved constantly. The outcome defines “Traditional Chinese Culture” until now.

Looking at the Bronzes, we can perceive a zealous effort for improvement and refinement. Some superb specimens can be seen in the museums. This is comparable to Europe, where improvement was also a major impetus. However, speaking about sculptures representing humans and nature, the pursuit of realism did not or could not reach a natural level. Being this on purpose or not is unanswerable; for sure looking at the beautiful bronzes, missing skills of artisans was apparently not the reason. The frescos in tombs and the few murals and stone sculptures were simple and rather unrefined. The apex of sculpturing (using clay) being that of the soldiers of the Terracotta Army (in Xi-An) [兵马俑], which were fairly lifelike and grand, once also very colorful which added up to their lifelikeness. But they could not compare to the perfection of Greek marble statues of the same period. For efficiency and therefore manufacturing reasons, they were made out of modules⁴ (such as the mass production of hands, legs, bodies, etc.), which made the enterprise easier and faster. Just the face was molded with the soldier’s individual traits. Nevertheless it was a magnificent enterprise.

Traditionally, the artistic unification and the ensuing consolidation of the Chinese Culture took place from the Qin Dynasty until around the Tang dynasty or so, depending on the points of view. The introduction of Buddhism furthermore influenced Chinese Art and artisans, especially in the sector of sculpting and frescos⁵. The artisans obtained new impulses, but also the Literati class started to discover Art (Painting) and engaged growingly in it. Even though it’s not completely truthful to say so, but for the sake and unfussiness of this article let’s settle with this for now.

In China as in Europe, in ancient times Artisans and thus Art, were more or less connected to religious believes. The topics and representations kind of depicted their view of things and what was alleged to be important to them (like war for example, which was crucial globally). The introduction of Buddhism influenced not only Chinese religious beliefs but Art as a whole. Dr. Anderson⁶ assumed: “It is probable that the higher development of painting in China was due to the influence exercised by specimens of Indian and Greek art introduced with the Buddhist religion.” Paintings, frescos and sculptures depicted Buddha’s life started to spread all over the country, foreign influence being in fact visible. However, lacking authentic first hand sources; we cannot truly know how the people of the pre-Han period perceived Art as such and where the differences of view between China and Europe truly lie. Only in later times, when Art

⁴ Prof. Dr. L. Ledderose (Heidelberg) emphasized that the soldiers were composed from different molds.

⁵ See Dong Qichang [董其昌] and his view about Art. He was a supporter of the classical Chinese canon.

⁶ Anderson: *The pictorial Arts of Japan*.

became a tradable and collectable good for broader masses, the view of Art is more comprehensible; especially if we converse about paintings⁷.

Since the early epochs of China, the literati greatly influenced Art. Consequently the first real high-class Artists considered so by the Chinese were indeed mostly also literati, painters like Gu Kaichi [顾恺之], Yan Liben [阎立本] and many others. No wonder that, unlike Europe, they used their writing tools to draw and paint. Painting and writing was and is directly linked and interrelated in China. Therefore never have they made use of oil as a medium for their pigments; ink and water-color being the traditional medium.

As a further consequence the literati / literate artists wanted to detach themselves from the artisans and their trade. Thus mastery and perfection of artistic skills could not be anymore the highest criteria of admiration, critic and value. They commenced to implement the “Thought”, the personal expression of the artist, their attitude and ideology as criterion for evaluating and appreciating Art. In particular, painting and calligraphy freed itself from the trade, not anymore being just pieces created for sale, instead for the enjoyment of the viewer. The ideology and philosophy of the artist and the onlooker were consequently taken into consideration and affected Chinese Art and the view of it from then on. When and where this process started and how fast it spread we cannot pin point accurately, however we can assume it came into being after the Han dynasty and was widely established under the Tang dynasty.

Let's return to the art objects. In the past 3000 years in China (as well in Europe) development and improvement is clearly visible. Chinese Paintings of plants, animals or landscape reached highest quality (especially during Song dynasty), every so often drawn perfectly and accurately. From roughly the Tang dynasty on, Chinese painting divided itself into the northern and southern schools, the chief distinction between those two schools being that the southern was less trammelled by the canons of art to which the northern rigidly adhered.

Another noticeable difference was landscape painting. Many centuries before landscape played a higher part in European pictures, the artistic appreciation of natural sceneries in China was very developed and enjoyed wide admirations. So did animals and flowers, like the vigorous horses of Han Gan [韩幹], and the lifelike birds and insects of Huang Quan [黃筌]. The northern school whose paintings were delicate and detailed reached their highest standard and lifelikeness. The southern school was rather freer and tried to touch the soul, the feeling of the observer. The artists in the devotion to their masters (or idols) began to copy the styles of the artists rather than to follow him in his sincere admiration, creating thus a traditional canon which lasted till today.

As J. D. Ball⁸ noted: “*Chinese ideas of painting differ widely: the laws of perspective, and light and shade, are almost unknown. Height usually represents distance, that is to say, distant objects are put on top of the picture....*” Also: “*The subsidiary parts are treated with as much care as the principal; the smallest details are elaborate with as much minuteness as the most important. Figures are nearly always represented full-faced; the heads are often stuck on at a forward angle of 45°. What the Chinese delineator considers of prime importance is the representation of the status occupied by the subject: as his rank in the official service, or grade in the literary corps, or social position. The presentation of a living, feeling soul, revealed in its index, the face, sinks into utter insignificance in comparison with the exposition of the external advantages of rank and fortune, or of the tattered rags*

⁷ Art for the majority, if anything, had a substantial impact since the rise of graphical duplicating techniques. Till today an original piece of art never lost his elitist character, didn't it?

⁸ J. Dyer Ball: *Things Chinese*. 1989 (First published in 1903), Graham Brash Ltd.; Singapore.

of the old beggar fluttering in the breeze.” This being some of the most strikingly different observations for Ball, it is clear from these statements, that even though he lived in China for so many years, he did not understand Chinese painting being still stuck in his own view of Art as it was taught to him from an early age. So, was this for Ball a question of intolerance, indoctrination or conditioning? No! Cultures are merely different; there can never be a ranking of superiority or inferiority, because Cultures are always unique and thus not comparable. This could be why he studied Chinese Culture so intensively.

Chinese had two schools and so seemingly more freedom of expression than European painters in ancient times, only recently European Art became freer from her aesthetic and realism canon. The southern school tries to picture a feeling rather than follow realism, to encompass all in a few strokes. Lines and Curves were empowered to give a full array of feelings through just simple but perfectly drawn strokes of ink. Some were quite colorful some just in ink with all his shadings. Some pictures were masterpieces of their time. They tried to catch the moment, the essence of the matter. Likewise the Chinese liked vivid colorful pictures more than Europeans. Already centuries before, they used bright pigments and liked more vivid representations in comparison to the rather “darker” paintings of the renaissance and baroque periods, like Rubens with his (in comparison to Chinese coloring) heavy colors or Rembrandt with his famous chiaroscuro. But especially their mastery of their traditional ink and its shadows from black to pale grey was remarkable. Their pictures tended to be vivid and “alive”.

As a result the View of Art of the Chinese has changed over the centuries, but we can outline several points:

- Adherence to a traditional canon
- Landscape were of value but Portraits rather of no influential concern
- No systematic perspective or realism compulsory in all the “schools”
- Either colorful or just plain ink (black / grey shadowing)
- Attempt to reproduce the “Thought”, the feeling rather than realism
- Buoyant vivid pictures through lines and curves, catching the “essence”

Furthermore the mediums were different, China with her inks and watercolors on silk and or paper, and Europe with her oil paints on canvas. Surely it was a big revelation when Chinese and Europeans saw each other’s paintings. The aesthetic was born out of their different cultural upbringings, and so their views. Nowadays, foreign influences are globally clearly visible in all aspects of our lives, and so we regretfully lost much of our traditional identity, in China as in Europe.

So, even though each one of us has his/her/their view of Art, undeniably they are influenced by their culture and upbringing. The same is noticeable with their respective cuisines. We can only presume a certain art object would be rather liked by a Chinese or by a European, after knowing and studying their respective Cultures. That’s why so many misunderstandings happened, because usually ones view does not take into account other’s culture. But some things remain unchanged. ART COMES FROM ARTISAN, from their skill! The higher the skill, the closer it is to a masterpiece. Unfortunately now this word, Art, is getting abused. Many so called artists think skill is not required; you just have to convince people that this is art and don’t need to prove your skill.

With modernization and globalization a movement towards the cheap and the fake began, artists who are (willingly or unwillingly) not able to paint, draw or sculpt produce what they themselves call Art. Easily recognized by cheap mediums, non time intensive, mass produced, or pieces that is so easily created that even a child could copy it, like the Art of Miro and Beuys⁹.

How did we end up here? How could we detach artistry from art? How can we label so many cheap shows and presentations as Art? But this question must be answered by each person individually. Besides, taste cannot be disputed, it's individual and subjective!

Fine Art was a privilege for the upper class, for the gentry and aristocrats. The common people always liked to imitate the upper class, but were usually not able to afford it. In Europe the artists of the past painted for a living. In China they did too, but some belonged to the upper class and produced the finest pieces of art. When did the separation of "Rich Art" from "Poor Art" start and became so mingled? There was always an Art for the elite and an Art for the masses, the folk-art (artisanery). Usually the latter was coarse and cruder, but nevertheless enjoyed wide popularity, and had also its own beauty. However, it was rather strictly separated from the Fine-Art which was created for a literati elite clientele. The rebellious upheaval of modernization and the transformation in philosophy, not to forget the recent globalization with its multi-cultist fashion, impaired Art rather than benefitting it. Fatefully we arrived in the era of commercialization, everything has a price tag. But where is the philosophy and tastefulness? Personally I habitually prefer to look back and favor the old masters over the new age ones. Nonetheless, as a conclusion, Gombrich believes Art doesn't need to be "beautiful" neither does it need to be "ugly". He rather believes that each individual should deal with each picture (or piece of Art) anew and just enjoy it.

⁹ This point surely provokes strong criticisms. Historically seen, it was the detachment of Art from artistry, out of which later the "Entartete Kunst" (degenerated art) sprang up; which was later suppressed in Germany by the Nazis. It was a cultural-historical phenomenon, a spiritualisation process as counter-reaction against the secularisation of Art and the art-market. Pointless to lament about; nowadays "modern art" has to be considered.